



Reflections on the Historiography of American Eugenics: Trends, Fractures, Tensions

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Abstract. By the 1950s, eugenics had lost its scientific status; it now belonged to the context rather than to the content of science. Interest in the subject was also at low ebb. But that situation would soon change dramatically. Indeed, in an essay-review published in 1993, Philip Pauly commented that a “eugenics industry” had come to rival the “Darwin industry” in importance, although the former seemed less integrated than the latter. Since then, the pace of publication on eugenics, including American eugenics, has only accelerated, while the field has become even more fractured, moving in multiple and even contradictory directions. This essay explores the trajectory of work on the history of American eugenics since interest in the subject revived in the 1960s, noting trends and also fractures. The latter are seen to result partly from the fact that professional historians no longer own the subject, which has attracted the interest of scholars in several other disciplines as well as scientists, political activists, and journalists, and also from the fact that the history of eugenics has almost always been policy-oriented. Historians’ desire to be policy-relevant and at the same time attentive to context, complexity, and contingency has generated tensions at several levels: within individuals, among historians, and between professional historians and others who also engage with the history of eugenics. That these tensions are resolved differently by different authors and even by the same authors at different times helps explain why the fragmentation that Pauly noted is not likely to be overcome anytime soon.

Keywords: Eugenics, Historiography, Garland Allen, Periodization, Sterilization, Marriage counseling

Introduction

Although the history of American eugenics has by now been investigated from what might seem every imaginable angle, the subject continues to fascinate both scholars and journalists. It may thus come as a surprise to find that, in the immediate post-war period, when eugenics lost its scientific status, its past interested hardly anyone at all. How did the history of eugenics first capture and why has it continued to hold the attention of so many academic and popular writers? In what ways has recent scholarship challenged long-standing assumptions about what eugenics is and, relatedly, when it flourished and declined? And how has the historiography of eugenics been marked by scholars' as well as journalists' desire to be policy-relevant, an aim that has characterized the field from the start? In a journal issue honoring the career of Garland Allen, it seems appropriate to begin the analysis with one of his works – although the work in question is one in which the subject of eugenics is strikingly absent.

A “Wandering Subject”: Classifying Eugenics in the Twentieth Century

The index to Garland Allen's seminal *Life Sciences in the Twentieth Century*, published in 1975, contains no entry for “eugenics.” Indeed, the subject's only mention is as one of several important biology-related movements, including genetic engineering, the mutagenic effects of radiation, the environmental crisis, and biological warfare, which the author regretted having to exclude or treat only briefly (Allen, 1975a, pp. xi, xiii). Of course the book's content was necessarily selective. But this particular omission seems surprising given Allen's seminal contributions to scholarship on the history of American eugenics and the fact that the topic was clearly on his mind at the time he wrote the book (see Allen, 1970, 1975b, 1976).

Forty years later, it is hard to imagine any historian – and not just an expert on the history of eugenics – taking so little notice of the subject in a new account of twentieth-century biology. But given the book's “internalist” orientation, its absence is understandable. In the mid-1970s, when the influence of the “Edinburgh School” and the sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK) was only first being felt in the U.S., scholars still routinely distinguished internal from external accounts of the history of science. *Life Sciences in the Twentieth Century* was explicitly internalist, concerned with technical developments in the science of

biology and not with its social context or consequences.¹ And in 1975, the prevailing view in the history of science, as well as related academic disciplines and the culture at large, was that eugenics lay outside the pale of science. As a subject, it pertained to the context of science, not its content.

Eugenics' transition from a science to a non-science can be traced in the changing categories of the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) system. In a fascinating article that employs the case of eugenics to illustrate problems created by "wandering subjects," information scientist Joseph Tennis (2012) notes that eugenics first appears as a subject in the 7th edition of the DDC, published in 1911. At that point, eugenics was classified as a biological science, and it remained in its location near Genetics in Biology until the 1950s. But over time, the class numbers for eugenics in the 500s (Sciences) disappeared. Despite the strong constraints on classificatory change (given the disruption it causes for libraries), the few books published on the subject in the postwar period were now located in History or the Social Sciences. Tennis (2012, pp. 1352–1353) notes that "although it was once possible to say through the lens of the classification scheme that there are books published on eugenics as a science (specifically life science), it is no longer possible to do so." The subject's exclusion from Allen's internalist history of the life sciences is thus congruent with the assumption, already commonplace in the 1970s, that discussions of the subject simply did not belong in books about science.

Commenting on the historiography of human genetics, Gausemier et al. (2013, p. 3) note that the standard view of genetics professionals is that their field only became scientific when it was disentangled from eugenics, an assumption that explains why scientists' histories of their field tend to feature Archibald Garrod and to a lesser extent Felix Bernstein, researchers whose results are considered to have survived the test of time. Gausemier and colleagues suggest that, even from a Whig perspective, this view is misguided since eugenicists made many important methodological contributions that have in fact endured. The most obvious are the statistical techniques pioneered by Francis Galton, Karl Pearson and his biometrician colleagues, and by R. A. Fisher. However, as Pauline Mazumdar (1991) has shown, eugenically-oriented German scientists, some of whom later served the Nazis, also developed

¹ Allen (1975a, p. xiii) explained that, "in a young field such as history of science in general, or history of biology in particular, the internalist view must in many ways precede the externalist. It is necessary to know some of the details of how science develops before asking how that development was influenced by or, in turn, influenced the society at large."

complex mathematical models for use in determining which traits were truly inherited (models that in Britain were then employed by such left geneticists as J.B.S. Haldane, Lancelot Hogben, and Lionel Penrose in the service of critiquing mainline eugenics).²

But in the mid-1970s, geneticists' contemptuous view of eugenics and eugenicists would have been widely shared by historians. (That attitude remains typical of histories authored by journalists and other popular science writers and by scientists, who overwhelmingly continue to characterize eugenics as "pseudo-science").³ The consensus was first seriously challenged by Donald MacKenzie (1976, 1978), whose articles and book, *Statistics in Britain: The Social Construction of a Scientific Debate* (1981) explored the role of Galton, Pearson, and other British eugenicists in the development of mathematical statistics.⁴ MacKenzie was a leading figure in the Edinburgh School and proponent of the symmetry thesis (that the truth of a theory cannot explain its success, and that true theories as well as false ones should be explained sociologically). The term "pseudo-science" was not in his vocabulary.

However, SSK approaches gained ground only slowly and incompletely in the history of science in general, and made especially little headway in the history of eugenics, perhaps because SSK's implicit antimoralism was at odds with the disposition of many scholars to draw lessons for contemporary policy from that history. Moreover, the geographic focus for both MacKenzie and Mazumdar was Britain, where influential eugenicists such as Fisher at Rothamsted and Pearson and co-workers at the Galton Eugenics Laboratory were far more sophisticated, conceptually and methodologically, than were their American counterparts. Indeed, Pearson and David Heron at the Galton Lab publicly expressed disdain for the family studies produced by the American Mendelians Henry H. Goddard, author of *The Kallikak Family* (1912), and Charles Davenport and colleagues at the Eugenics Record Office (Spencer and Paul, 1998; see also Mazumdar, 1996). Thus it was much easier to dismiss the Americans' work as unscientific.

² For a more detailed discussion of this point, see Paul and Spencer (2001).

³ Thus a human geneticist (Morton, 1999, p. 105) likens "the pseudo-science of eugenics" to astrology and alchemy while a chapter in a book on race by a population geneticist is titled "Pseudoscience and the Founding of Genetics" (Graves, 2003). Journalist Edwin Black, author of *The War on the Weak* (2003a) and other popular histories of eugenics, similarly asserts that: "Eugenics was the pseudoscience aimed at 'improving' the human race" (Black, 2003b).

⁴ On Karl Pearson, see also Porter (2004) and Magnello (2009).

From a Trickle to a Flood: The Trajectory of Publication on American Eugenics

By the end of the 1950s, eugenics had lost not only its scientific status but also much of its appeal for authors and readers, and works on the history of American eugenics slowed to a trickle.⁵ However, interest in the subject began to revive in the 1960s, a trend that gained momentum in the following decade. “Reform eugenicists” such as Carl Bajema (1976) and Frederick Osborn (1973, 1974) published historical accounts emphasizing the contrast between, as the title of a collection of essays edited by Bajema had it, “eugenics then and now” – the latter humane, non-racist, voluntary, attentive to environmental factors, and scientifically sound. But the subject was also taken up by professional historians whose interest was often stimulated by contemporary genetics-related developments and their associated anxieties.⁶

One prominent concern was the prospect of an increase in the human “genetic load.” It seemed that increased exposure to ionizing radiation, especially from atmospheric nuclear testing, would increase the mutation rate, while advances in medicine, such as insulin treatment for diabetes, would allow individuals who would once have died before childbearing to survive and transmit their defective genes. Conversely, concerns also swirled around the prospect of human improvement through direct manipulation of the human germline (“genetic engineering”) as well as sperm banking, artificial insemination by donor, and other existing or predicted reproductive interventions.

In the mid-1960s, the nature-nurture controversy re-emerged as well with physicist William Shockley’s claims for genetically-determined racial differences in IQ and warnings that the less intelligent individuals and races were outbreeding the cognitively better-endowed. Then at the end of the decade, psychologist Arthur Jensen (1969) argued more influentially that the black-white gap in IQ scores was largely attributable to genetic differences, and for all practical purposes was fixed. His paper, published

⁵ Based on results from the Google Ngram viewer, Tennis (2012, p. 1354) concludes that the term had fallen out of favor by 1960s. However, interest in the subject did not entirely disappear. Thus, the history of eugenics was discussed in Richard Hofstadter’s *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1944) and in works on immigration and race, most notably John Higham’s *Strangers in the Land* (1955) and William Stanton’s *The Leonard’s Spots* (1960).

⁶ Haller was an exception. Indeed, in the introduction to the paperback version of the book, published more than two decades after the hardcover, he commented that in 1963 the policy issues that exercised eugenicists no longer seemed germane and that writing about eugenics felt like writing about phrenology or witchcraft (Haller, 1984, p. ix).

in a respected academic journal, was soon followed by psychologist Richard Herrnstein's analogous argument that, beneath the gradient of occupations "is a scale of inborn ability" that explains social stratification, and that we should accept rather than uselessly rail against the fact that social equality is unachievable (Herrnstein, 1971; see also Herrnstein, 1973). These interventions generated numerous critiques and protests, especially on college campuses. Two decades after his book first appeared, historian Mark Haller (1984, p. x) commented on the lack of concern with the genetic basis of personality and behavior in 1963. Indeed, at the time he thought that the pendulum had swung completely in the environmentalist direction, with a "taboo" (which he clearly disapproved) on the study of the heredity of intelligence and behavior. But by the end of the decade, the nature-nurture debate was back – with a vengeance.

It was in this politically-charged context that American eugenics first became a popular topic for historians including Donald Pickens (1968), Kenneth Ludmerer (1969, 1972), Garland Allen (1970, 1975b, 1976), Charles Rosenberg (1974, 1976), Linda Gordon (1974), Allan Chase (1977), Stephen J. Gould (1974), and Hamilton Cravens (1978, pp. 157–190). Authors writing in the 1960s and 1970s typically equated eugenics with state policy and hence the U.S. sterilization and restrictive immigration laws, and they focused almost exclusively on the attitudes and actions of elites, often just a small handful of geneticists.⁷ Temporally, eugenics was seen as a movement that flourished in the 1910s and 1920s, with its foundational assumptions eroded and finally destroyed by scientific, economic, and political developments of the 1930s. In particular, advances in genetics were thought to have undermined beliefs about the efficacy of selection for and against traits of eugenic interest while the depression, with its sudden reversals of social status, and the rise of Nazism, made eugenicists' claims about genetic superiority and inferiority untenable. Most historians writing at that time would have agreed with Donald Pickens (1968, p. 5) when he asserted: "The Great Depression of 1929 and the rise of genetics marked the decline of eugenics as an organized movement and as a creed among intellectuals and social leaders."

Publication of Daniel Kevles's *In the Name of Eugenics* (1985) ushered in a new era of scholarship, in particular by extending the narrative into the post-World War II period and indeed to the present (with prenatal diagnosis, carrier screening, and other reproductive genetic technologies characterized as a "new eugenics," a phrase Kevles did not use pejora-

⁷ Mark Largent (2008, pp. 1–3) notes that histories of coercive sterilization in the U.S. typically assign responsibility to Charles Davenport and a few scientific associates, thus making unintelligible the fact that two-thirds of U.S. states enacted sterilization laws. He writes: "The sterilization movement was not isolated to a few places, it was not an aberration, and it did not disappear after World War II" (p. 2).

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tively), and by emphasizing the diversity of practices promoted as eugenic and of their proponents. Thus his account of eugenic methods included “free love” and birth control as well as legal enactments such as sterilization and immigration restriction, and he included among eugenics’ advocates feminists as well as misogynists, and social and political radicals as well as conservatives. The book was the first major effort to explain eugenics’ wide appeal, including to many women. It did so by emphasizing what Molly Ladd-Taylor (2001, p. 299) has characterized as “the ‘ordinariness’ of eugenics and the adaptability of eugenic principles.”

In the book’s aftermath, studies of eugenics proliferated. Indeed, less than a decade later, Philip Pauly (1993, p. 1310) could plausibly claim that a “Eugenics Industry” had come to rival the “Darwin Industry” in importance. Indeed, the pace of publication has not yet slackened, with eugenics becoming a subject for scholars in other disciplines, as well scientists with policy interests, anti-abortion and other activists, and journalists.⁸ Although much of the recent growth in the scholarly literature has been in comparative and international studies of eugenics, works focused on the U.S. have also increased exponentially.⁹

These include general histories as well as studies of specific states and regions, organizations, and individuals.¹⁰ Many works now link eugenics to other domains (such as public health, religion, and the arts), and to other social movements (such as campaigns for conservation and for legalization of birth control).¹¹ Sterilization has

⁸ Journalists sometimes “discover” facts long-known to historians. For example, the title of one popular history is *Better for All the World: The Secret History of Forced Sterilization and America’s Quest for Racial Purity* (Bruinius, 2006). Ironically, a reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* (2005) noted that “This history isn’t as ‘secret’ as the title makes it out to be – it’s been told most recently by Edwin Black in *War Against the Weak*” – another account of eugenics by a journalist who gives short shrift to the work of professional historians. Indeed, Black (2003a, p. xxii) explicitly commented that, with a few exceptions, he “considered published works little more than leads.”

⁹ On eugenics internationally, see Bashford and Levine (2010).

¹⁰ General and regional histories and overviews include Paul (1995), Larson (1995), Selden (1999), Carlson (2001), Black (2003a), Kline (2001, 2010), Stern (2005a) and Lombardo (2011).

¹¹ On medicine/public health: Braslow (1996), Dowbiggin (1997), Paul (1997), Pernick (1996, 1997), Stern (2002, 2005b, 2012), Lombardo and Dorr (2006), Wilson (2006), Wexler (2008) and Comfort (2013); on religion: Rosen (2004), Farmer (2008) and Leon (2013); on the arts: English (2004) and Wolff (2009). On the conservation movement: Brechin (1996), Stern (2005a), Lovett (2007), Rome (2008), Spiro (2009), Robertson (2012) and Allen (2013); on contraception/population control: Allen (1991), Dowbiggin (2002), Ramsden (2003), Franks (2005), Schoen (2005), Coates (2008), Carey (2012), Robertson (2012) and Engs (2014).

been analyzed in greater depth, from new perspectives, and also with an eye to the second half of the twentieth century.¹² The focus on geneticists and other elites has been challenged by studies of eugenics in popular culture, as has the assumption that support for eugenics rested on acceptance of “hard” views of heredity.¹³ Studies of race, which had focused almost exclusively on Southern and Eastern Europeans, have broadened to include African-Americans, considered both as victims and proponents of eugenics.¹⁴ Gender and sexuality have become prominent themes,¹⁵ as have pronatalist “positive” eugenic practices such as Better Babies and Fitter Families contests, campaigns to legalize contraception, and the post-World War II development of marriage counseling.¹⁶ The last was one of several topics, including the histories of genetic counseling and human genetics, which have extended the temporal boundaries of eugenics. And these are only some of the most notable topics.

In 1993, Pauly commented on the field’s lack of integration. It is even less unified today, in part because the history of eugenics, long dominated by historians of science and medicine, is now a subject for scholars from diverse disciplines, including disability, women’s, and cultural studies, bioethics, law, education, communication, and literature, each with its own theoretical framework, characteristic methods, and canons of evidence and argument. But professional historians are also not of one mind. Although there is a trend to greater complexity and nuance in the academic literature, it is far from uniform. As Adam Shapiro (2015, p. 331) recently noted, some historians continue to view American eugenics “from the perspective of the German Nazi-incarnation that emerged later,” and hence emphasize “the aspects of American eugenics most

¹² On sterilization in law and practice: Reilly (1991), Braslow (1996), Ladd-Taylor (1997, 2001), Schoen (2005, 2011), Stern (2005b), Bruinius (2006), Largent (2008), Kluchin (2009), Lombardo (2008), Nourse (2008), Wellerstein (2011), Hansen and King (2013) and Cohen (2016).

¹³ On popular culture: Pernick (1996), Hasian (1996), Cogdell (2004) and Currell and Cogdell (2006); on concepts of heredity: Pernick (1997) and Cooke (1998).

¹⁴ Dorr (2008), Dorr and Logan (2011) and Mitchell (2004).

¹⁵ On gender and sexuality: Bix (1997), Briggs (2003), Kline (2001), Ordovery (2003), Stern (2005a) and Lovett (2007).

¹⁶ On “positive” eugenics: Dorey (1999), Kline (2001, 2010), Daniels and Golden (2004), Stern (2005a, pp. 50–181) and Lovett (2007).

credited as an influence in the Third Reich.”¹⁷ Thus it is difficult to generalize about where the history of American eugenics is going – apart from the observation that it is going in many different and even contradictory directions. But at least this much is clear: the trend of recent scholarship has been both to broaden the scope of that history and, in so doing, to fundamentally subvert its conventional periodization.

“What and When” was American Eugenics?¹⁸

Through at least the 1970s, nearly all historians assumed with Haller (1984, p. 7) that “after 1930, the course of eugenics was rapidly downhill.”¹⁹ That eugenics fell into disrepute as a result of scientific advances, the fiscal crisis of the 1930s, and revelations of Nazi atrocities remains the prevailing assumption in popular accounts whether produced by historians, scientists, activists, or journalists. A timeline developed by a respected public-television station illustrates the common view. The text following the heading “1923: Eugenics movement reaches its height” reads: “After World War I, few scientists joined the ranks of the eugenicists. As the weight of the scientific community shifted toward behaviorism and true genetics, popular opinion followed. ... The eugenics craze was already fading when the horrors of institutionalized eugenics revealed in Nazi Germany during World War II doused it entirely as a movement” (WGBH, 1998). But scholars, both in the U.S. and internationally, have become increasingly skeptical of the once taken-for-granted view that World War II represents a watershed in the history of eugenics.

¹⁷ The comment appeared in a review of Sharon Leon’s *The Image of God*, on the Catholic response to eugenics. Shapiro also remarks that, as Leon showed, the constant comparison of American eugenics to Nazism “was in no small part brought about by the Catholic use of the German example to make the case against sterilization in America. This invites us to ask the question: Were American Catholics not only responsible for most of the organized opposition to eugenics, but also responsible for much of our present historiography?” Hart (2012, pp. 34–35) also notes the emphasis on race and links to Nazism in the historiography of American eugenics, which he faults as well for an over-reliance on elite opinion.

¹⁸ The heading borrows from the introduction to the book by Bashford and Levine (2010, pp. 4, 11), where they ask: “What Was Eugenics?” and “When Was Eugenics?”

¹⁹ Haller (1984, p. 7). Ludmerer (1972, p. 204) similarly wrote: “Though many geneticists (and anthropologists) renounced the eugenics movement in the 1920s, the movement survived until the 1930s when the atmosphere created by the Depression and the rise of Hitler finally made many former eugenic sympathizers hostile to doctrines of racial superiority.”

A main reason is increasing awareness of the fact that the trajectory of sterilization does not fit the conventional periodization. Internationally, the majority of sterilization laws were enacted in the 1930s and later; that is, after the ostensible decline of the eugenics movement. The Great Depression, once thought to have eroded support for eugenics by undermining the association of social success and genetic worth, has come instead to be seen as a stimulus both to the passage of new laws and to more vigorous enforcement of old ones. Indeed, in the context of financial crisis, even some eugenicists who had expressed reservations about sterilization came to appreciate its cost-saving potential. According to Pickens (1968, p. 202): “The crash of the stock market and the subsequent crippling of the economy greatly altered the climate of opinion that had been receptive to eugenic speculations.” It now appears that although the climate was indeed altered, the shift was in the opposite direction. Moreover, as in many countries, the practice of involuntary sterilization continued in the U.S. after World War II, not always with benefit of legal authorization. And as elsewhere, poor women and ethnic and racial minorities were usually its targets, as in the secret hysterectomies of poor black women known as “Mississippi appendectomies” (Kluchin, 2009, p. 73; see also Stern, 2005b; Largent, 2008, pp. 138–147).

Other factors have also contributed to skepticism about World War II as a turning point, in particular, new work on the history of marriage counseling and of human genetics and genetic counseling – fields that developed largely in the postwar period. Along with population control (which was oriented toward the Third World), these were now seen as areas to which individuals and organizations active in the prewar period, aiming to salvage at least part of their agenda, turned their energies after World War II. Moreover, the rise of molecular biology combined with fears of a rising human mutation rate generated calls by prominent scientists to control human breeding in order both to prevent further genetic deterioration and to enrich the population with superior genotypes (Paul, 2002; Bashford, 2010). For an increasing number of historians, far from collapsing as a result of its association with Nazism, eugenics flourished in new and more acceptable guises. Indeed, according to Wendy Kline (2001, p. 156) “The ‘Golden Age’ of eugenics occurred long after most historians claim the movement had vanished.”

The reperiodization resulted not just from the accumulation of new evidence but also an implicit redefinition of what counts as eugenics. The evolving interpretation of marriage counseling nicely illustrates the point. In the 1960s and 1970s, both Mark Haller and Kenneth Lud-

merer viewed the establishment of marital and family counseling as a move *away* from eugenics. Thus Haller (1984, p. 179) wrote: “Paul Popenoe and Roswell Johnson diverted their attention from eugenics in 1930 when as a result of their interest in sex education and birth control, they opened an Institute of Family Relations in Los Angeles. The Institute, the first of its kind in the country, provided premarital examinations and marriage counseling.” Ludmerer (1972, p. 31) similarly noted that although Paul Popenoe had “at one time been an avid eugenicist,” and had even endorsed the Nazi sterilization law, he had later changed his mind, and “is known today for his successful work as marriage and family counselor.” In contrast, Ladd-Taylor (2001), Kline (2001, pp. 141–156), Stern (2005b), and Ian Dowbiggin (2014) view establishment of the American Institute of Family Relations (AFIR) as a continuation of the eugenics project, although in a form better suited than campaigns for compulsory sterilization to “the pronatalist domestic culture of the post-war period” (Ladd-Taylor, 2001). Where Haller and Ludmerer saw a change of heart and thus discontinuity, scholars writing recently see a consistent underlying perspective. This difference in judgment is explained partly by new evidence but also by an implicit shift in the meaning of eugenics. For earlier historians, marriage counseling – neither racist nor coercive and scientifically up-to-date – could not, by definition, be a form of eugenics.

Tensions of Policy-Oriented History

Alison Bashford (2010, p. 539) comments that: “There is often a gap between those who seek to write the history of eugenics, and those who seek answers to questions like ‘Is Gene Therapy a Form of Eugenics?’ She is certainly right.” For many who pose questions of the latter sort, the history of eugenics is a resource to be mined for facts to support particular policy conclusions. And as Bashford notes, history employed for this purpose is often “flat and uniform.”

But those who write the history of eugenics – even professional historians – also experience tensions. Indeed, tensions can be experienced by individuals as well as disciplines. After all, the history of eugenics has always been policy-oriented history, linked, often explicitly, with contemporary controversies: over the genetics of mentality and behavior, over sociobiology, over “genetic engineering,” over contemporary reproductive genetic technologies. It is not only bioethicists, scientists, journalists, and political activists who aim to draw lessons from history.

Often the lessons drawn by historians are vacuous: we should avoid the mistakes of the past, proceed cautiously in adopting new technologies, and other platitudes with which virtually no one would disagree. We study the history “in order to understand better the present and prepare for the future” (Ludmerer, 1972, p. 6). And even when the morals have content, they are sometimes contradictory. Thus the history of sterilization is invoked both as an object lesson for why the state should avoid regulating the use of reproductive technologies and, conversely, as an object lesson for why it should regulate them (linked to fundamentally different views of what was morally wrong with eugenics – the use of coercion or the attitudes it expressed toward disability).²⁰

Regardless of the direction it takes, lesson-drawing is most compatible with a simple history. That is why, when intervening in current debates is the primary aim, as is often the case for scientists, journalists, and activists, the histories tend to feature the most repugnant individuals, attitudes, and policies. It is also why historians’ work is often ignored, when it is not simply mined for useful facts.²¹ Sterilization has remained the focus of most popular accounts, which have been largely untouched by historians’ detailed and empirical studies showing that rationales could be social and therapeutic as well as eugenic, that sterilizations (prior to as well as post-World War II) also occurred in the absence of authorizing laws, that institutional factors could be as important as ideology in determining sterilization rates, and that those sterilized were not always victims but sometimes colluded with doctors to turn the laws to their own end of obtaining access to otherwise unavailable contraception (Braslow, 1996; Ladd-Taylor, 1997, 2001; Schoen, 2005; Largent, 2008; Kluchin, 2009; Wellerstein, 2011; Dyck, 2013).

These and other findings complicate a story that serves a didactic purpose best when it remains uncomplicated. Mark Largent (2014, p. 520) made essentially this point when he noted that “as it became more specific and contextualized, the historiography of eugenics may have become less useful, especially as scholars have demonstrated that the term eugenics was applied to activities ranging from family planning to genocide and was advanced by figures across the political spectrum and

²⁰ For a more detailed analysis of these and other positions, including the more complicated stance of critics writing from a feminist, left, or disability-rights perspective, see Paul (2014).

²¹ Rosenberg (2007, p. 203) notes that “even the work of academic historians is inevitably a source of decontextualized data for real world actors who deploy it in the context of their particular visions of policy.” He adds: “But the historians’ primary context is the world of other historians, and it is this very distance from the policy arena that makes the historian’s perspective so valuable.”

around the globe.” But many professional historians who write about eugenics also aspire to be useful – although perhaps they are uniquely pulled in two directions (individually and collectively), struggling both to be policy-relevant and hence with the temptation to simplify, and to be attentive to context, contingency, and complexity.²² That these aspirations play out differently in different individuals, and sometimes in the same individual at different times helps to explain both why the fragmentation that Pauly noticed in 1993 has not diminished and also why it is unlikely to be overcome anytime soon.

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²² Of course it is not only historians of eugenics who aim to be policy-relevant. Thus Brandt (2004, p. 261) writes: “Ultimately, I believe that many of us sought careers as historians because of our desire to connect the past with the present This may not be the only – or even the most important – motivation for historical investigation, but it certainly is one, especially in the instance of the history of medicine, where profound moral and material questions remain so fundamentally unresolved.” However, the tensions would seem to be particularly stark in the domain of eugenics.

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